

# CAN WE FEED THE WORLD?

Olivier De Schutter, the UN's new special rapporteur on the right to food, spoke to **Karen McColl** about the current food crisis and what should be done about it



**W**orld leaders met in Rome last week to discuss coordinated international action to tackle the food price crisis currently causing widespread hunger and social unrest. The price of food commodities, such as rice and wheat, on international markets rose sharply in 2006 and 2007. Prices rose even more sharply in the first three months of 2008. In

developing countries, where families spend as much as 60-80% of their income on food, such price increases have a dramatic impact.<sup>1</sup> Low income countries that import more food than they export are worst affected. The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation described 36 countries in crisis and, of these, 21 are African countries.<sup>2</sup> Within countries, the poorest groups, both urban and rural, are hardest hit.

**A girl queues to purchase government subsidised rice Quezon City, Manila**

The crisis is caused by several factors affecting the balance between the demand for food and the available supply. Poor harvests in Australia, some Asian countries, and parts of Europe have contributed. In addition, grain stocks were very low. There are also, however, important long term structural causes. Although experts broadly agree on the factors involved (many of which are inter-related), there is less agreement on which factors have had the greatest impact.

Although we produce more than enough food to feed the planet's population, 854 million people are reported to live in food insecurity. Of these, 60% live in sub-Saharan Africa or south Asia.<sup>3</sup> The recent price increases are estimated to make an additional 100 million people food insecure.<sup>1</sup> Even before the current crisis, it was clear that the millennium development goal of halving the proportion of people who suffer from hunger by 2015 is unlikely to be met.<sup>4</sup>

In the immediate short term, the survival of the 73 million people who currently depend on food aid is threatened. The soaring food prices, coupled with steep fuel price increases, led the UN's World Food



**A car drives past a billboard reading "That absurd first world consumes three quarters of the energy produced in the world" in Havana**

REUTERS/ENRIQUE DE LA OSA



REUTERS/DARREN WHITESIDE

## UNDERSTANDING THE FOOD PRICE CRISIS

### Soaring prices

*International food commodity prices* increased by an average of 83% over the past three years. In the year to March 2008, the price of corn rose by 31%. Rice and wheat prices rose by 74% and 130% respectively. *Domestic prices*—worst hit countries have seen rises of 30-40%

### Rising demand

*Population growth*—More food is needed to feed the world's population, growing by 75 million each year. *Increased meat consumption*—Urbanisation and income growth in India and China have led the growing middle classes to switch from cereals to meat. Cereals are increasingly diverted to feed livestock animals

### Supply factors

*Inadequate investment in agriculture*—Unfair competition from northern producers combined with a lack of investment in training and infrastructure (eg, irrigation, communications, roads, and access to microcredit for small scale farmers)

*Climate change*—A limited amount of land is suitable for growing crops. Every year farming land is lost to desertification, and climate change is a serious threat to future agricultural production

*Rising oil prices* are increasing farmers' costs, particularly of fertilisers and pesticides, and pushing up costs for food importers

*Growing demand for biofuels*—Use of some food crops to produce biofuels and the reallocation of scarce land to grow biofuels is reducing supply

*Speculative investment*—Some of the price volatility may be due to the activities of large investors in commodity markets

*Uncoordinated responses*—Once prices began to rise, some countries exacerbated the situation by restricting exports or buying huge quantities to create stockpiles

Programme to appeal for an additional \$755m (£380m; €480m) in funding, just to be able to deliver existing relief programmes.<sup>5</sup>

### Long term consequences

"Human health will bear the brunt" of the crisis, according to WHO director general, Margaret Chan, who reminded the World Health Assembly in May that adequate nutrition is the "absolute foundation for health throughout the lifespan."<sup>6</sup> In addition to the direct health effects of hunger and malnutrition, there are indirect consequences. Undernutrition in pregnant or lactating women can have a devastating intergenerational effect. Adequate nutrition is essential, particularly in children, for the immune system and cognitive development. Undernutrition can thus greatly affect vulnerability to disease and educational development.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, more money for food will mean less money for health care in poor households. Families may also respond to higher food prices by withdrawing children, particularly girls, from schools.

Recent events have reminded us that food security is vital for peace and stability. The food crisis has caused social unrest in around 40 countries. Some countries have deployed the army to protect food supplies.<sup>1</sup>

### Policy responses

"One of the explanations for the crisis is that states have acted unilaterally in their responses," explains Olivier De Schutter. Some countries have prohibited or restricted exports, while others have tried to build up stocks of rice or wheat. These actions are conflicting and serve only to push prices up further.

He says it is understandable that each government is trying to protect its population, but international law obliges countries to work cooperatively. Immediate and medium term actions are needed, along with structural change. Although national strategies will be important, countries cannot tackle these issues alone, and De Schutter argues that a framework for international cooperation is needed urgently.

"In the short term, we need to feed the hungry, by providing food aid which will not disrupt local production but instead support it" he says. This means funding international agencies, such as the World Food Programme, to buy food in local and regional markets.

Immediate action is also needed to save



**"In the short term, we need to feed the hungry, by providing food aid which will not disrupt local production but instead support it"**

Olivier De Schutter

future harvests. Costs for farmers in developing countries have shot up as the prices of fuel, seeds, and fertilisers have risen. These farmers require help now to be able to buy what they need to grow food next season.

In the medium term, the problems of speculative investment and biofuels must be tackled. Options to curb the impact of speculation include building up grain stocks that could be distributed when prices rise dramatically and imposing a tax on speculative investment on food commodities. "Food is not a commodity like any other," says De Schutter. "First of all because availability of food is a human right. It is an essential good."





REUTERS/JOHN JAVELLANA

The Philippines is grappling with its worst food crisis in years and many farmers are abandoning farming

And, secondly, because supply adapts very slowly to the price signals which are given by the market.”

In relation to biofuels, De Schutter argues that it is important to differentiate between the current biofuel sources and second generation biofuels under development. These new types of biofuels need to be carefully studied. He calls for an urgent review of the current US and EU targets that promote use of biofuels.

Changes to international trade rules clearly need to be part of the response and De Schutter is in dialogue with the World Trade Organisation. According to the UN Development Programme, rich countries spend just under \$1bn every day supporting their own agricultural systems with public subsidies. This compares with just over \$1bn a year on aid to developing country agriculture.<sup>8</sup>

The longer term challenge is to increase food supply. For this, massive support for agriculture in developing countries, particularly in Africa, is needed. There are calls for a new “green revolution” that is less resource intensive than the 20th century green revolution, which increased farming yields but relied on intensive use of water, energy, and

fertilisers.<sup>9</sup> Less resource intensive agriculture would also help to shield small farmers from the effects of fuel price increases.

### International cooperation

Close international cooperation will be crucial to tackling the food shortages, now and for the future. Last week’s summit was an important first step. “For the first time in years you had world leaders talking about the importance of agriculture and helping small farmers in development,” said Alexander Woollcombe, Oxfam’s press officer in Rome. “This wasn’t just an agriculture summit; nor was it a trade summit or a climate change summit. It was a food summit. That recognition that food, and all development issues, are complex and require comprehensive responses is really encouraging.”

Olivier De Schutter welcomed the summit’s focus on the need to massively reinvest in agriculture in developing countries but said that important questions remain. “Those questions include how to promote agriculture so as to increase global food production and ensure that supply matches growing demand; how to reconcile food security with the energy needs of the planet; how to combat

the speculation on futures markets which increase costs for food importing countries; how to address the role of the private sector and its human rights responsibilities; and how to ensure appropriate attention to the social and environmental impact of the initiatives which are being launched.”

A task force set up by the UN Secretary General in April will give an update in the coming weeks. In September, world trade talks and a UN summit will be considering this problem. The food crisis is also a key theme for the forthcoming G8 meeting in Hokkaido, during which De Schutter says the priority should be coordinated action “on the foolishness of financial markets.”

De Schutter took up his mandate at a time when the right to adequate food is threatened on an unprecedented scale. “This is a right which requires international solidarity and, in many cases, the developed countries and the developing countries have diverging interests regarding which kind of international framework to establish—despite the fact that it is in their common interest, I believe, to have a prosperous world and to have a world where poverty and hunger are effectively combated.”

Competing interests: None declared.

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